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# A close look at Thomas Hart Benton

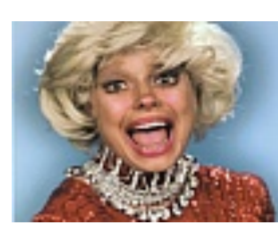
The muscular narratives of American muralist Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) fill many public spaces across the country, bridging the gap between public art and folk storytelling. Unknown to many, Benton also crossed the line between art and film, profoundly influenced by the cinema, and serving in various capacities to the movie industry around the time of World War II.

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'Bootleggers' by Thomas Hart Benton, 1927.

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'Bootleggers' by Thomas Hart Benton, 1927.



By Keith Powers /  
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#### If you go...

**WHAT:** American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood

**WHERE:** Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem

**WHEN:** Through Sept. 7

**TICKETS:** Free with museum admission. Visit [www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org) or call 978-745-9500.

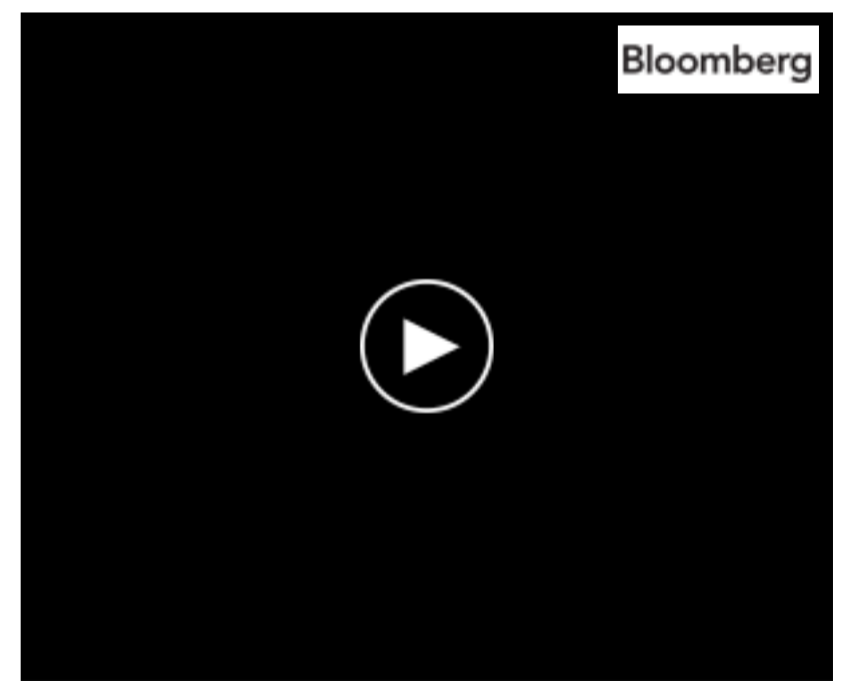
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Unknown to many, Benton also crossed the line between art and film, profoundly influenced by the cinema, and serving in various capacities to the movie industry around the time of World War II.

A new retrospective at the Peabody Essex Museum, "American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood," explores this connection with a thoughtful and populist exhibition that includes the artist's murals, his drawings, and a selection from various films that employed his talents.

Curated in a way that brings viewers not only close to Benton's work but also evokes the time period he worked in, "American Epics" appropriately treats Benton's work not as high art, but as part of an America that tended to be fervently nationalistic, and enjoyed its own myth-making.

Benton's work borders on caricature. That means no criticism: his broad outlines, heavy shadows



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and direct portraits perfectly suited his artistic ambitions. Telling stories through art has a particular genius, and Benton's vision of America's heroes, hucksters, musicians and bootleggers — both urban and rural — gets boldly presented with great clarity through his work.

It was also profoundly cinematic — intentionally or not. While his work in "film" — really limited to set paintings and promotional activities, as well as some propaganda work for the government — hardly defines his artistic output, curator Austen Barron Bailly has done an outstanding job linking Benton to the popular artistic attitudes of the period.

Benton was no flak, simply working for the dollar and doing what he was told. His commissioned murals, often incorporating controversial subject matter that embarrassed his sponsors, are proof enough of that.

His style, with sculptural figures in quasi-classic poses, always robust depictions but often lacking subtlety, suited his goals perfectly. Benton worked hard, tirelessly moving from one outsized commission to another, and the sheer breadth of his output deserves attention.

This exhibition features selections (and some reproductions) from his mural series "American Historical Epic," as well as numerous individual works either inspired by the film industry or actually painted in Hollywood during one amazingly productive month — which produced more than 400 graphite sketches, three dozen ink drawings, on one enormous oil on canvas, "Hollywood" — that Benton spent in Tinseltown.

The setting of the exhibition deserves particular attention, and adds greatly to the fun. Film clips are scattered throughout. A replica of Benton's worktable with paints and materials fills one corner. A 1950s era living room, complete with black-and-white TV console, offers a place for nostalgic relaxation.

The whole feel of the exhibition — letting the viewer live in Benton's artistic climate, and not peppering visitors with exhortative explanations — provides a complement to Benton's stature. Benton dreamed large. His biography and genealogy alone — two ancestors were U.S. senators — make him an interesting study. And his artistic training was as sophisticated and intense as any American painter of the period.

"American Epics," on view through Sept. 7 before it travels to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, balances a reverential look at the ambitious muralist with a sensible view of the times he worked in.

For more information about museum hours and special events, visit [www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org) or call 978-745-9500.

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